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James Monroe and the Political
Organization of the Northwest

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JAMES MONROE AND THE POLITICAL ORGANIZATION
OF THE NORTHWEST

BY

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THESIS

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When James Monroe, on the thirteenth of December, 1783, took his seat in the Congress of the Confederacy he found that body deliberating over "some questions of the utmost consequence¹ that can arise in the councils of any nation." Not the least of these was the problem of the Northwest. It is true that up to this time the cession of only one state (New York) had been accepted (October 29, 1782)² but Connecticut and Virginia had both expressed their willingness to further the common good by relinquishing their claims and Congress already looked upon the land as under her jurisdiction.

The western question seems to have interested the young Virginian of twenty-five from the first. In a letter to Richard Henry Lee written during his first week in Congress he pointed out the importance of the subject and the difficulty of its adjustment. Like a true son of the Revolution he feared the effects of prohibiting settlers from locating wheresoever they would thus ingrafting on the Constitution "a principle which may in its consequences as it ever hath done with other powers, terminate in the loss of our liberty."³ On the other hand he considered war constantly imminent because of the encroachments of the frontiersmen upon the bordering European powers and savage Indians. Yet his attitude

1. Works of Jas. Monroe, I., 23.
2. Congressional Journal, VII., 393.
3. Works of Jas. Monroe, I., 23.

towards the West was not the national one of James Madison but a provincial and jealous one. He felt that the West would have little in common with the Atlantic states and but slight interest in what affected them. He raised the common cry of the day, "they will outnumber us in Congress unless we confine their number as much as possible"¹ and therefore the Atlantic states ought to keep a prevailing influence upon the Ohio and westward. Of a similar nature was his suggestion to M^adison that it be stipulated in the treaty with Spain "that imports shall pass into the western country through the ports of the United States only."²

Monroe like many of his time regarded the newly acquired lands as a financial asset of the Confederacy. In his opposition to the newly formed Federal constitution he scoffed at those who said the Confederacy had no resources and pointed to the rich lands of the West.³ This must have been only a continuation of what he had advocated in Congress for on the first of February, 1785, he moved - "Whereas by the acts of several of the states, ceding vacant territory to the United States there is a prospect that by a proper disposition of it, it may be made a valuable fund for the discharge of the public debt, and whereas security to the persons and property of the settlers will contribute much to the facility and expedition of the sales, therefore resolved that men be raised for the term of three years unless sooner discharged and quota'd on the states in the following proportion".⁴ A few months later he wrote to Madison,

1. Works of Jas. Monroe, I., 108.

2. Ibid, I, 152.

3. Elliot's Debates, III, 215.

4. Works of Monroe, I, XXXVI; this motion is not found in the Congressional Journals.

"I am strongly lead to believe the western lands will absorb all ye¹ domestic debt Eastw'd."

Concerning the ideas of Monroe on the government of the Northwest there is little if any record. As to his opinion on Jefferson's original ordinance we know absolutely nothing. This ordinance was taken up for discussion on April 19, 1784² and the two following days were devoted to it. On no point during that time is a vote of Monroe's recorded nor does he make any mention in his correspondence of the ordinance or of his absence. On the twenty-third of April he cast his vote in favor of the amended ordinance. This silence is all the more to be regretted as he was absent later³ when the antislavery motion of Rufus King was before the House. and thus we have no evidence of his attitude towards slavery in the Northwest.

Two years later, May 10, 1786, in answer to a petition from the French inhabitants of Illinois.⁴ a "Committee on motion of Mr. Dane for considering and reporting the form of a temporary government for the western states" read a plan which was considered a week later and recommitted after some amendments on July 13. The amended report, to which nothing further seems to have been done, has come down to us, yet how much of this was due to the work or opinions of Monroe it is impossible to say. He was chairman of this committee, a fact which seems all the more strange when its personnel is taken into consideration. The other members were William S. Johnson, Rufus King, John Kean and Charles Pinckney - men who certainly

1. Works of Monroe, I., 78.
2. Journals of Congress, IX., 98.
3. Ibid, X., 57.
4. Alvord, Cahokia Records, CXXIX, 567.

influenced Monroe as they were not of a type to be dominated by a youngster whose opinions were somewhat like those of a weathercock. The introductory paragraphs of this report, however, embody Monroe's resolution, which had been adopted earlier that month, for decreasing the number of states to be formed out of the Northwest. "It being stipulated by individual states, in their Acts of Cession to the United States, that the Territory thus ceded be laid into States of certain dimensions, and admitted into the Confederacy with the rights of the thirteen original States, it becomes necessary, that Congress should take such measures as shall be best calculated to carry the said condition into effect. This can be done only by promoting its settlement and securing to its settlers and others who may purchase the soil, the rights of property and of personal safety, with the Conditions upon which they shall ultimately obtain that important privilege. The Committee therefore think it the duty of Congress to adopt and publish, previous to the sale of any part of the said territory, the plan of a temporary government for said State or states, with the period at which it shall expire, and they assume their form and equal Station in the Confederacy.

"They are aware of the propriety of defining in the first instance the bounds of the States within which such government shall apply; but as Congress did on the day of recommend it to the said states to revise their Acts of Cession, as to the said Condition which respects their dimensions so as to enable the United States to make such division of the same as therein described, it would in their opinion be improper to make any further arrangements respecting it until the fate of the said recommendation shall be determined. It is however to be understood, that if the reasons

urged for the proposed alteration, shall be satisfactory, and the States accede to it, the States as therein designated, shall be perpetual. But if on the contrary, they should adhere to the said Condition, however unfortunate it may be in its consequences, the States must be contracted to an extent of territory conformable to the condition as it now stands. Leaving therefore this point to be determined by this event, the Committee beg leave to submit the following plan of temporary Government for such State or States."¹

The plan itself is a great step from the Ordinance of 1784 to that of 1787. The former provided for no government prior to the time when the district should reach the territorial status except that Congress should from time to time pass such regulations as were "not inconsistent with the principles of the Confederacy and necessary for the preservation of peace and good order among the settlers."² On the other hand many of the ideas and phrases of the plan which Monroe presented were later embodied in the Ordinance of 1787.

The scheme of 1786 provided first of all for a governor appointed and commissioned by Congress. He was to be assisted by a council of five members also appointed by Congress whom he must consult on all important matters but whose advice he was not obliged to follow. He was commander in chief of the militia with the power of organizing it and of appointing all officers below the rank of Major who, however, were commissioned by Congress. Over the General Assembly he had complete power, could convene, prorogue, or dissolve it whenever he deemed it expedient and had an absolute

1. Works of James Monroe, I. 6.
2. Journals of Congress, IX., 109.

veto over all its acts. The governor under the ordinance of the following year had practically the same powers expressed in identical words, the principal difference being that, with the Court, he had certain legislative functions until the general Assembly was organized. It was also stipulated that he should be a freeholder and a resident of the territory. The organization of the council under the later ordinance was also more complicated.

The governor and the council were assisted by a secretary also a Congressional appointee who kept a record of their meetings and of all disagreements between them. The later ordinance also provided for this official though it defined his duties more specifically and provided that he should be a resident free holder.

When the district contained a certain population the scheme proposed that the people should be empowered by Congress to elect a general assembly. The representatives in this legislature must be citizens of the United States and resident free holders for a certain period in the district. Suffrage was also based on property though a foreigner resident in the district one year might vote. At the same time that permission was granted for the organization of the general assembly, power was also given to keep a member in Congress though he was to have neither the privilege of debating nor of voting. Both these sections are followed almost word for word in the plan of the next year, the principal changes being in the limitation on the number of representatives in the house and the length of residence in the district for voters.

True to the spirit of the time the ordinance specified that the new states should bear their proportionate share of the

Federal debts and burdens of government. The draft concluded by declaring that as soon "as any of the said districts shall contain an equal number of free male inhabitants, with the least numerous of the Thirteen Original States "it shall be empowered by Congress" "to form a free constitution, of their own - appoint Delegates to the Congress of the United States, who shall be received in the same, upon an equal footing with the Thirteen Original States, having the same rights of freedom sovereignty and Independence as the said States."¹

In the land sale ordinance, however, which also came from the pen of a Virginian, Monroe evinced great interest. Thomas Jefferson's original plan was given to a general committee composed of one member from each state and it was William Grayson who in this committee brought forth harmony from discord and drew up the plan which the House finally adopted after some amendments.² It is only natural then that Monroe was ever ready with suggestions whenever the plan was under discussion. If he himself did not move an amendment he was supporting his Virginian colleague in his.

The land sale ordinance as it was finally passed bears witness to this interest. It is that part of the clause which bears directly on the method of sale and reads thus: "The township, or fractional part of a township, No.1, in the first range, shall be sold entire; and No.2, in the same range, by lots; and thus in alternate order through the whole of the first range. The township, or fractional part of a township, No.1, in the second range, shall be sold by lots; and No.2, in the same range, entire; and so in alter-

1. Works of James Monroe, I., v; this report is not mentioned in the Congressional Journals.
2. Bancroft, I., 180.

nate order through the whole of the second range; and the third range shall be sold in the same manner as the first, and the fourth in the same manner as the second, and thus alternately throughout all the ranges." ¹ The original clause had been debated back and forth, Monroe always advocating greater freedom in the sale of the land. As the ordinance first stood a township could be sold in sections but only in the order in which they were numbered on the plat. ² Monroe first advocated that every third township should be sold by sections beginning with the lowest number in each range. ³ However when this measure was opposed and an amendment offered to change it to every second township, he supported the amendment and not the motion he had seconded. Nevertheless the amendment and the original motion were defeated. The following day Mr. Henry seconded ⁴ by Monroe made a motion which, though more liberal, was practically the amendment urged by Grayson and Monroe. After some discussion the heat of which is felt even in the dry prosaic Journals, the change was embodied in the ordinance.

In the same clause there is a provision that the price of land shall be one dollar an acre. Two attempts were made to reduce this amount but in both cases Monroe cast his vote in favor of the original price. ⁵

Monroe writing to Madison while the land sale ordinance was under discussion mentioned the struggle that took place between the men from the South over the size of the townships but states no

1. Journals of Congress, X., 120.
2. Ibid, X., 100.
3. Journals of Congress X., 106.
4. Ibid, X., 108.
5. Ibid, X., 95, 118.

personal opinion at all in the matter.¹ The draft as it came from² Grayson's hands provided for townships seven miles square.³ Grayson, seconded by Monroe, on two occasions moved to have it changed to six miles square. Both motions were lost and there is no record of any such change but in the final ordinance the size of⁴ the townships conformed to the wishes of the two Virginians.

Monroe also attempted to modify the ordinance by moving that the following clause respecting reservations: "Also one-third part of all gold, silver, lead and copper mines for the purpose of special sale, at such times and places as Congress may thereafter direct," be struck out. But the motion failed to carry and the⁵ clause remained.

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Much to the great disgust of Madison there had been included in the ordinance as reported by Grayson a clause which reserved one section in every township for the support of religion, the profits of which were to be applied in accordance with the will of the majority of the male residents.⁷ When this clause came up for discussion, considerable debate resulted. First an attempt was made to include "charitable uses" in the appropriation, then to exclude religion and finally to drop the whole clause. Through it all Monroe⁸ stood firm for the support of religion and charity by the state.

The great work of James Monroe with respect to the organization of the Northwest yet remains to be told. Yet the more this is studied and thought over the less it seems to be a mark of states-

1. Works of Monroe, I, 76.
2. Journals of Congress, X, 99.
3. Ibid, X, 106, 112.
4. Ibid, X, 119.
5. Ibid, X, 94.
6. Works of Madison, II, 145.
7. Journals of Congress, X, 96.
8. Ibid, X, 96.

manship but rather that of youthful shortsightedness and provincial jealousy. It has already been noted that Monroe regarded the West as something far different than an inherent part of the Union. From the first he thought the action on the western question had been too¹ hasty. At a time when every state had an equal vote in the affairs of the nation, Jefferson would give to the Northwest ten votes whereas the original Atlantic states would have only thirteen. It is not to be wondered at then that Monroe at a time when the majority of the political leaders expressed a fear that the centre of influence would pass beyond the mountains insisted that the numbers of the northwestern states must be confined as much as possible.

He made two trips to the westward, one in the late summer of 1784, the other just a year later. On the former one he went no further² west than the Falls of Niagara but on the second he was near the³ mouth of the Big Miami on the Ohio. These two trips, but especially the second one, gave him a view of the land just ceded to the United States. His former fears that the West would predominate in the future seem to have subsided. His attitude becomes one of condescension. He views the Northwest as a barren waste but still advocates that the number of states be diminished. This would have a three-fold result. The new states to be formed would be benefited but at the same time the West would be weakened and Congressional control would be of longer duration because of the nature and expanse of the territory. He expresses these views to Thomas Jefferson in a letter written shortly after his return. "My several

1. Works of Monroe, I, 108.
2. Ibid, I, 40.
3. Ibid, I, 96

routes westw'd," he writes, "with the knowledge of the country I have thereby obtained, have impressed me fully with a conviction of the impolicy of our measures respecting it. I speak not in this instance of the ordinance for the survey and disposal of it, but of those which became necessary and were formed upon the act of cession from the state of Virginia. I am clearly of opinion that to many of the most important objects of a federal government their interests, if not oppos'd will be but little connected with ours;

instead of weakening theirs and making it subservient to our purposes we have given it all the possible strength we co'd.: weaken it we might also and at the same time (I mean by reducing the number of the States) render them substantial service. A great part of the territory is miserably poor, especially that near lakes Michigan and Erie and that upon the Mississippi and the Illinois consists of extensive plains wh. have not had from appearances and will not have a single bush on them, for ages. The districts therefore within wh. these fall will perhaps never contain a sufficient number of Inhabitants to entitle them to membership in the Confederacy, and in the mean time the people who may settle within them will be gov'd by the resolutions of Congress in wh. they will not be represented."¹

The immediate consequence of this attitude was that Monroe in the next session of Congress made a motion respecting the formation of states from the western land cessions. The Journals bear us record of when the motion was made but on July 7, 1786 "Congress took into consideration a report of a grand committee to whom was referred a motion of Mr. Monroe." The motion runs as follows: Resolved, That

1. Works of James Monroe, I, 117.

it be recommended to the legislatures of the states of Massachusetts and Virginia, to take into consideration their acts of cession, and revise the same, so far as to empower the United States in Congress assembled, to make such division into states of the ceded lands and territory, as the situation of the country and future circumstances may require; with this limitation and condition however, that all the territory of the United States, lying north-west of the river Ohio, shall be formed into a number of states, not less than two nor more than five, to be admitted into the confederacy on the principles¹ and in the forms heretofore established and provided." His two colleagues, Grayson and Lee, attempted to amend the report by stating explicitly the boundaries of the five states but their motion, to which Monroe gave his support, was lost. More discussion followed the chief effect of which was to change the minimum number of states² to be formed from two to three. After this the report was adopted. Virginia complied with this suggestion on December 30, 1788.

Thirty-two years later when James Monroe occupied the Presidential chair one of these five states applied for admission into the Union. In his second annual message to Congress the President commented on the accession of Illinois and the colonial policy of the United States which he had helped form. His words sound as if they might have been directed to the Monroe of former years who looked upon the entrance of these states with such jealous dread. "I communicate with great satisfaction," he writes, "the accession of another state (Illinois) to our Union, because I perceive from the proof by the additions already made the regular progress and

1. Journals of Congress, XI, 97.

2. Ibid, XI, 100.

sure consummation of a policy of which history affords no example and of which the good effect can not be too highly estimated. By extending our Government on the principles of our Constitution over the vast territory within our limits, on the Lakes and the Mississippi and the numerous streams, new life and vigor are infused into every part of our system. By increasing the number of the states the confidence of the state governments in their own security is increased and their jealousy of the National Government proportionately diminished. The impracticability of one consolidated government for this great and growing nation will be more apparent and will no longer be dreaded. In those cases of a local nature and for all the great purposes for which it was instituted its authority will be cherished. Each government will acquire new force and a greater freedom of action within its proper sphere. Other inestimable advantages will follow. Our produce will be augmented to an incalculable amount in articles of the greatest value for domestic use and foreign commerce. Our navigation will in like degree be increased, and as the shipping of the Atlantic States will be employed in the transportation of the vast produce of the Western country, even those parts of the United States which are the most remote from each other will be further bound together by the strongest ties¹ which mutual interest can create."

1. Works of Monroe, VI., 82.

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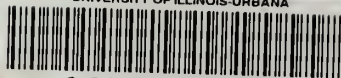
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